CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

George Washington University Oral History Project
Interview with Lisa Berg
Conducted on September 22, 2018 by Betty King

Lisa Berg was the official photographer for Marion Barry's 1979 mayoral campaign. At the time of this interview, she was a successful professional photographer living in New York City.

BK: This is Saturday, September 22, 2018. I'm Betty King and I'm talking to Lisa Berg. Thank you very much to agree to talk to us. How did you come to be the official photographer for Marion's 1978 campaign?

LB: I was just starting out in photography and I was working at the Corcoran Art Gallery and the Corcoran School, really, mixing chemicals, and I photographed an opening at the Corcoran, and Max Berry [finance chair of Barry's 1978 campaign] was there. So Max and I started to talk and he said, "Oh, I'm doing a campaign," and I said, "Oh, I had just come back from the Missouri workshop where I won second prize, and I would love to do a campaign."

BK: What is the Missouri workshop?

LB: It's University of Missouri, is a great journalism school, and they would have a workshop every year for a week in the fall, and you'd apply and they'd choose, I can't remember, maybe thirty people, and you would work there and you had *National Geographic* editors and other editors from all over the country critiquing your work. So it was great; it was seminal.

BK: The job?

LB: Yes.

BK: Now, let's backtrack a little bit. How did you get into photography; did you start as a child, and you studied it? I mean, tell.

LB: Yes. I always liked it, and my dad was the typical dentist who had a dark room in the basement, so he and I would go in the basement and we'd develop pictures, and then I always was interested in journalism, but I was never a confident writer, but I was always a more visual person. So that kind of made sense to me, and I went to a woman's college in Philadelphia, and I became the photography editor of the newspaper.

BK: And it was from there that you went to the Missouri –

LB: Yes, from there I went to the Corcoran Art School, because I figured I need to learn more technical and just to get involved in that world, and then I went to the Missouri workshop and that was inspirational.

BK: So, then you met Max, and he –

LB: Then I met Max and he said it was, it seems like such a simpler time, and it was kind of like Judy Garland and whatever. "Do you want to ride a horse in the derby?" And I said, "Sure, I'd love to do a campaign." And he said, "Well, I think you'd be a good fit and let me introduce you." And I had met him a couple of times. I had worked at the Corcoran, so we had seen each other a couple of times, and then I started working on the campaign.

BK: What was the arrangement with the campaign; were you a contractor; were you a volunteer?

LB: No, it was so loose, I think I got an hourly rate. And I remember at the Corcoran I was making $3.00 an hour, (laughter) so whatever they offered me; I think it was twenty. I thought it was (laughter), I had died and gone to heaven.

BK: How old were you then?

LB: I was twenty-seven, something. Yeah. So it was all this wonderful experience, and I had known of Marion Barry as a civil rights worker.

BK: And you met him first when you went to work on the campaign?

LB: Yes.

BK: And did you also work with Ivanhoe?

LB: Yes, worked with Ivanhoe, Marion. I remember Bob Johnson who then went on to become Bob Johnson and [the founder of] BET [Black Entertainment Television]. And I remember for election day, Bob Johnson drove me around and we followed the campaign car. We were in the motorcade.

BK: Oh, great. So you were photographing him every place he went?

LB: Yes.

BK: I've got some wonderful pictures that you took of me doing various things in the campaign. There's a wonderful picture that you took of the headquarters staff that I have had copied several times because other people said, "Oh, you've got that, but I don't have it."

LB: Ah, well, I have this aside, but forty years later I'm now going through archives and finding things, so I do have a box I want to send down, but you just need to tell me who to send it to.

BK: Oh, to Jennifer King at the Gelman Library.

LB: Okay. We'll get that later, the exact.

BK: Okay. Oh, that's wonderful. Do you have any particular recollections of especially interesting photoshoots?

LB: I do remember the Pope came right after Marion won the election, and I wasn't that, an experienced photographer in something like that, on a worldwide stage, and I remember his helicopter landed on the lawn, on the –

BK: I think it may have been the lawn of The Ellipse in front –

LB: Of The Ellipse, yes.

BK: – of the White House.

LB: Yes. But it was the public park. It wasn't the White House Park. Yes. And because I was the mayor's photographer, they said you could go wherever you want; you could do whatever you want, but stay with the Secret Service agent. So, Lisa, "What do you want to do?" I said, "What should we do?" He said, "Move, he's coming." He, like, told me how to do the photoshoot basically. And I remember I took, someone had a baby and I can't remember who, but I took a picture of the baby with the Pope blessing him. No, the baby's like forty years old now. (Laughter.)

BK: It would be.

LB: I know. I remember that was like the first world stage.

BK: And you took the shoots of Marion and Effi [Marion's wife] meeting the Pope.

LB: Yes, of them meeting the Pope, and everybody was nervous. Yeah. It was like everybody was new to this kind of world stage and everybody was excited. It was great.

BK: Well, now, you continued to work for him for a time after the inauguration, is that correct?

LB: Yes. And I remember the inauguration was fun. That was great. And walking down 14th and U, which no one went to in those days, and he walked the whole distance.

BK: Yeah, that was –

LB: And that was great, right?

BK: They were building the metro over there. There was a worksite around there.

LB: Yes. Yeah, and nobody went there, and the fact he made everybody walk by there was pretty fantastic. I remember that. That was great.

BK: Even though when his demons took control, that was terrible, but he never really forgot the, remember, he used to talk about the least, the lost, the left out?

LB: Yes.

BK: He was always good at that.

LB: And I remember he talked about in so many speeches that I heard the arts being the cultural, how did he word it, saying that if you don't support the arts, you don't support the heart of the community? And now talking about it makes me sad how it turned so bad and so ugly.

BK: Yeah. Well, he had his demons, but he did remarkable things for this city. He really did.

LB: Yes. And I would say it's one of the few times that it was a truly interracial environment. Wouldn't you agree? That it was –

BK: Absolutely.

LB: I mean, whites and blacks and everybody –

BK: Latinos?

LB: Yes.

BK: Everybody.

LB: Race wasn't the problem. Anything that would go on, you wouldn't say, "Oh, because they're black or they're white," like people do now. It was, "They're old, they're tired," but it never was racial.

BK: No.

LB: The experience is the good ones from being his photographer. I remember when Muhammad Ali came. You know, I got to photograph all those kinds of things, and Harry Belafonte, and he spoke and people, all he said was, "Good evening," and everyone went whooo, (laughter) because his voice was so gorgeous and he was so gorgeous. There were really some incredible experiences I had at a young age that were amazing.

BK: Yeah. When did you come to D.C.?

LB: I came to D.C. in, I think, it's 1974.

BK: Okay, so that was four years before the campaign?

LB: Right.

BK: And when did you move back to New York?

LB: In 1996.

BK: Oh, so you were here –

LB: So, I stayed for a long time. Well, in '94; in the nineties I was back and forth between New York and Washington.

BK: Yeah. Okay. Well, it was an extraordinary summer, wasn't it, that summer?

LB: Yes. And it was, and everybody, I was meeting so many people. For me, it opened up a city that I barely knew. And I have to say that, and there was a warmth. It was a physical warmth before it, you know, I mean, it was just a very warm, wonderful moment.

BK: It was, and it was an extraordinary campaign in that, and, you know, there was no way in the world statistically could we have won compared to what, you know, the polls were saying and yet we all just believed. It was like a crusade.

LB: And he also had won, I think now, like I told you, I ran into Del and Gayle Lewis forty years later in the middle of Manhattan and we hugged and kissed as if not a day went past. And Del [active in the 1978 campaign and interviewed for this oral history] was so seminal in that campaign.

BK: Yeah, he was.

LB: And there were just so many people that were. There was a fondness, you know, an utter fondness of everybody.

BK: Did you work with Florence Tate?

LB: Yes. Florence was the press secretary.

BK: That's right.

LB: And Kwame Holman [Barry's "body man" in the 1978 campaign and Tate's assistant after the election]. The two of them were extraordinary. And Kwame and I kept in touch because of PBS [Public Broadcasting System where Kwame later worked for the NewsHour for many years]. I worked for them for a while. We kept in touch for a long time and then now I haven't kept up.

BK: Well, he's part of the group that did this project for the Gelman.

LB: Oh, wonderful.

BK: So, he's retired from PBS now.

LB: Yeah. Is he still in D.C.?

BK: Yeah.

LB: I'd love to say hello to him one of these times.

BK: Well, I'll give you his address.

LB: Yes. Yeah. No, working with people like Kwame and Florence, it was a passion. I don't know why, fun keeps coming back, too.

BK: I'm sorry?

LB: The word "fun" keeps coming back.

BK: Oh, yes, it was fun.

LB: Yeah.

BK: Oh, yes.

LB: And it was a lot of energy. Everybody was young.

BK: Everybody was working 24/7.

LB: Yes.

BK: And it didn't seem to matter. Yeah, I mean, and what was important was that we were going to get Marion elected and it was going to change the city. And we did and it did.

LB: Yeah. And the city would grow in a different way. And I remember we went to so many diverse events, and Marion was the first one to embrace gays. I remember we went to a big gay event and men danced and they did all that, and Marion was just great, fun, take pictures. He didn't care about anything like that. I mean, just being exposed to things like that. I was young; I wasn't exposed to that much at that point.

BK: Yeah. So he really opened the world to you in many ways.

LB: Yes.

BK: Great. Well, it was a fun year. It was wonderful.

LB: Yes.

BK: I'm so glad that we hooked up again after all this time.

LB: Oh, I know, I know; this is great. And it's just a fun, people from certain eras, you just go, there was nothing negative about that summer, that year. It was almost a continuation. I was a little too young for the real Civil Rights Movement, so to me it was –

BK: It was your civil rights.

LB: It was my civil rights movement (laughter) that I could do with people that I, oh, meeting John Lewis [civil rights leader, later Congressman]. I remember, met him, and Stokely Carmichael [civil rights activist in Black Panther Party]. You know, people who I never thought I'd meet in my whole life.

BK: Yeah. It was good.

LB: Yeah.

BK: Thank you very much.

LB: Oh, you're welcome.

[End of Interview]